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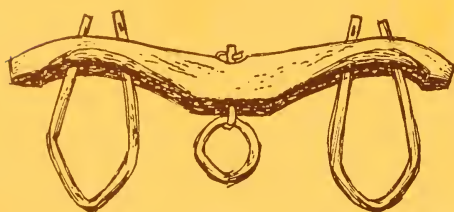
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Lincoln on the River Queen

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LINCOLN *on the* RIVER QUEEN

*By*

ELWIN L. PAGE

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For Frederick Squires  
& Edwin L. Page

# LINCOLN

ON THE

## *RIVER QUEEN*

By

ELWIN L. PAGE

An Address Delivered Before the Joint Convention  
of the General Court of New Hampshire

*and*

His Excellency, the Governor, and the  
Honorable Council

FEBRUARY 11, 1943



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## Lincoln on the *River Queen*

I CHOSE this subject with some misgiving, since to many of you, who have read Sandburg's *War Years*, it will be a twice-told tale. Nevertheless I have decided that the story will bear repetition, because I know of nothing else which so well shows Lincoln in his maturity—so well exhibits his humanity—throws light on so many facets of his complex personality.

On March 23, 1865, the steamer *River Queen* dropped down the Potomac River from Washington. On board was President Lincoln, bound for City Point and the front. With him went Mrs. Lincoln and their irrepressible little son Tad. Tad was to run in and out of the picture for the next fortnight, breaking in when Lincoln was talking with one and another, cuddling up to "papa-day's" knee and getting the pat or hug for which he longed. Mrs. Lincoln also was to pass in and out of the picture, exhibiting some of the most pronounced fits of the mental derangement which in time were to break her completely. Lincoln bore her tempests calmly and silently; unobtrusively and gently he showed his sympathy for those who felt the lash of Mrs. Lincoln's half-crazed words. Captain Robert Lincoln came into the picture incidentally on one or two occasions after they reached City Point,



but mostly he was too busy on staff work for Grant to give attention to his family.

The party arrived at City Point late in the evening of March 24. The next morning Lee chose to make an attack. For a time he drove the Union troops back, but they rallied, regained the lost ground, and finally won a victory. Before the battle ended, Lincoln went across the field where a few hours earlier there had been casualties of 1300 killed and wounded, and 2300 prisoners. He reviewed a division, and went on where he could see the firing. The field was crimsoned. He saw the writhing of the wounded—one man with a hole in his forehead, another with both arms shot away. He grew haggard, more haggard than ever, was so much moved that he had to decline Grant's invitation to dinner.

Secretary of War Stanton rebuked Lincoln for his taking chances. "I hope you will remember," he wired, "General Harrison's advice to his men at Tippecanoe, that they can 'see just as well a little farther of.' " Of course that amused Lincoln, whose nerves had become quieter. Sitting in the telegraph hut, his eye happened on three kittens. Told they were motherless, he picked up one and petted it, remarking that the dead mother could not grieve as many a poor mother was grieving for a son lost in battle. "Ah, kitties," he said, "thank God you are cats." He continued to fondle them, and made Colonel Bowers promise to have them properly fed.

Admiral Porter and Lincoln, two born story-



tellers, at first swapped yarns. Then they settled down, as all such men do, to serious talk.

General Sheridan came aboard Grant's boat, where Lincoln was. Lincoln looked down from his six feet four on the great, but diminutive, General. "General Sheridan," said he, "when this peculiar war began I thought a cavalryman should be at least six feet four high, but I have changed my mind — five feet four will do in a pinch." But Lincoln, Sheridan noted, did not tell a single one of his famous stories as they steamed up the river to the point where Sheridan's army was crossing. On the contrary, he seemed dejected, wondering what the contemplated movements would come to, somewhat fearful that Lee would take advantage of the movements to get into the rear of our army.

After another, and greater review, Sherman came up from North Carolina to plan concerted action with Grant. He and Grant and Admiral Porter came aboard the *River Queen* to confer with Lincoln. Sheridan was already off to cut Lee's communications before the main movement. If Lincoln had lived, that conference would have been momentous for the future of the country. The generals thought there must be one more bloody battle, and they practically promised that it would be the last. Repeatedly Lincoln said there had been bloodshed enough; couldn't they avoid battle? No, but one more would finish the war. Then Lincoln unfolded something of his thought about reconstruction,

a thought that Grant was to carry partly into action, with some acclaim, while Lincoln lived. Poor Sherman was to do the same, only to be reprimanded, for he did it after Lincoln was dead and other minds were in power.

By anecdote and parable Lincoln, on the *River Queen*, let his generals know that he hoped that Jefferson Davis would escape "unbeknown"—that the Confederate armies, soon to be defeated by Grant and Sherman, might return at once to a peaceful and free life—that with the dispersal of those armies the Southern States should set up provisional governments that he would recognize until Congress could take appropriate action. Lincoln had always thought that, since no State could secede, no State had ever been out of the Union—that they had only been out of proper relationship with the other States, and that they should be brought back to proper relationships in the briefest possible time.

And so the generals were off, each to his own task. Grant won the decisive battle at Petersburg. Upon invitation, Lincoln went to Petersburg and saw Grant briefly before he went on towards Appomattox.

Meanwhile Lincoln had spent an afternoon visiting sick and wounded rebel prisoners in the hospital. To their great astonishment, he shook hands with them until the surgeon thought his right arm must be painfully lamed. To prove the surgeon was unnecessarily alarmed, Lincoln stepped out of doors, seized an axe, set the chips flying, and then raised the axe and held it hori-

zontal at arm's length without a quiver. Then he refreshed himself with a glass of lemonade.

Upon the fall of Petersburg, Richmond had to be evacuated by the Confederates. Lincoln went up there with Admiral Porter. Landing in the Negro quarter, he walked the two miles to the center of the city, holding Tad by the hand, with no guard but a dozen sailors. There was welcome from the colored men, shouts of "Glory hallelujah," and Lincoln shook their hands. One darky kneeled to him. "Don't kneel to me," said Lincoln. "You must kneel to God only, and thank Him for the liberty you will hereafter enjoy."

They came to the white quarter. Here everything was different. There were plenty of people to look at Lincoln, but no cheers—only an oppressive silence—no welcome at all, save by one young woman who had draped the Stars and Stripes over her shoulders, one girl with flowers, a solitary man who threw up his hat.

Lincoln passed Libby Prison. "We will pull it down," said somebody. "No," replied Lincoln, "leave it as a monument." After the two-mile walk was done, Lincoln sat down to rest in a chair at the Confederate Executive Mansion, and learned that it was Jeff. Davis's chair. Then the officers of the party (for meanwhile a cavalry detachment had come to escort the President and the Admiral) drank some of Jeff. Davis's old whiskey. Lincoln declined.

Later, sitting in Davis's chair, Lincoln talked with Judge Campbell, formerly of the United

States Supreme Court. Campbell was the only secessionist leader of note remaining in Richmond. At a still later interview, Lincoln talked with Campbell about the revival of State government in Virginia, if hostilities ceased. Stanton was to nip that in the bud, and Lincoln was not to live to put Stanton in his place.

Back on the *River Queen*, Lincoln met Charles Sumner and others. Mrs. Lincoln had been back to Washington for a few days. Returning, she brought with her two cabinet members, with their families, Judge Otto, and Charles Sumner. At Sumner's request, she had invited a thirty-four year old Frenchman, Charles Adolphe Pine-ton, later Marquis of Chambrun. It is from Chambrun, who listened eagerly, and who very shortly wrote down his memories, that we have learned most of what occurred in the next few days. He was a keen observer and judged shrewdly. Lincoln expressed the feeling that his reception in Richmond had not been of good omen. Chambrun thought that "his only pre-occupation appeared to be the necessity of wiping out the consequences of the civil war, and to drive the war from the memory of all, nay, even of the criminal instigators." Those sullen faces in Richmond must have raised in Lincoln's mind the fear that Southern hearts might be slow to forgetfulness. It is small wonder that the man without malice was sad.

The party went to Petersburg, whence Grant and his main army had gone for final victory. The negro waiters on the *River Queen* wished to go



along, and Lincoln let them ride in the same car. Chambrun noted that the President "was blinded by no prejudices against race or color, and . . . had not what can be termed false dignity." At Petersburg, as at Richmond, the negro population was jubilant, the whites hostile. Every now and then Chambrun saw a white man run into his house with the apparent wish to avoid seeing Lincoln. Yet the Union officers reported to the President that animosity was abating. "There still remains much for us to do," said Lincoln, "but every day brings new reason for confidence in the future." He was not talking about Grant's operations, but about Southern sentiment.

Driving back to the train after their circuit of Petersburg, Sumner and Chambrun occupied the same carriage with the Lincolns. Lincoln saw a great tree. He ordered a halt, looked the tree over, and talked expertly about trees. Chambrun thought "that dissertation about a tree did not reveal an effort of imagination, but a remarkable precision of mind."

The next morning, Saturday, April 8, Lincoln spent five hours in the tent hospital, taking the hands of an estimated five thousand of our sick and wounded boys. And his arm was not sore, he told Sumner. Of these boys, who had never a complaint, Chambrun said: "Strange men they are, whom many approach and cannot understand, but who explain to him who does understand them the true greatness of their land." One of the poor boys died with a smile while Lincoln held his hand.

The young Frenchman studied Lincoln. "He willingly laughed . . . ," he wrote, "then he would close his eyes, and all his features would at once bespeak a kind of sadness as indescribable as it was deep. After a while . . . he would shake off this mysterious weight . . . In one evening I happened to count over twenty of these alternations . . ." Chambrun asked himself why Lincoln showed these contrasting moods. He gave it up. "These questions," he said, "remain unanswered for me, and will probably never be answered at all." The young man was wonderfully prescient; the questions still remain without satisfactory answer. But Chambrun was sure of one thing, as we are sure: one "was not long in finding out the marvellous rectitude of his mind, nor the accuracy of his judgment."

That Saturday afternoon the headquarters band came aboard the *River Queen* and played a concert. Lincoln called for the "Marseillaise," then had it played a second time. To Chambrun, who had left France because of opposition to the Empire, Lincoln said that he had to come over to America to hear it. Then Lincoln, somewhat to the surprise and disturbance of the bandsmen, demanded "Dixie." "That tune," he declared, "is now Federal property; it belongs to us, and, at any rate, it is good to show the rebels that with us they will be free to hear it again." That evening the *River Queen* sailed for Washington.

Palm Sunday, April 9, they were steaming up the Potomac. For nearly the whole day the talk was about literature. Here was one of the most

curious scenes in Lincoln's life—the man with hardly a year of formal schooling talking about Shakespeare with a high-born Frenchman and with Charles Sumner, so coldly proud of his great scholarship. But they talked as equals. Chambrun detected a “delicacy and soundness of taste that would honor a great literary critic.” Lincoln read copiously aloud from his copy of Shakespeare. Twice he recited:

Duncan is in his grave;  
After life's fitful fever he sleeps well;  
Treason has done her worst; nor steel, nor  
poison,  
Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing  
Can touch him further.

At times the conversation turned to political questions. Once Mrs. Lincoln broke in. Jeff. Davis, she said, must be hanged. Mildly Lincoln said, “Judge not, that ye be not judged.” Mrs. Lincoln was not to be gainsaid; for she, too, had seen Libby Prison. Again Lincoln said gravely, “Judge not, that ye be not judged.” Sumner asked Lincoln if he ever had any doubts about his declaration in 1858 that “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” “Not in the least; it was clearly true, and time has justified me.”

As they passed Mount Vernon, young Chambrun assumed the role of prophet and said what I think nobody before had thought or said: “Mount Vernon and Springfield, the memories of



Washington and your own, those of the revolutionary and civil wars; these are the spots and names America shall one day equally honor." That excited nothing in Lincoln except homesickness. "Springfield! How happy, four years hence, will I be to return there in peace and tranquillity!"

The *River Queen* chugged on with the life that in scarcely five days would be snuffed out. Washington came in sight. What possessed Mrs. Lincoln at the moment, nobody can say. Was it clairvoyance, or merely impatient impulse? "That city," she said, "is filled with our enemies." To which Lincoln replied, "Enemies! We must never speak of that."

So they came to the end of the voyage, and Lincoln drove from the dock to Seward's home. There his great Secretary of State had just come out of several days of delirium after a serious accident. Lincoln got close to him and whispered words of hope.

During that Palm Sunday talk about literature, Lincoln repeated from memory a part of Longfellow's "Resignation." We are not told what part, but I hazard the guess that it was the first five stanzas. They, but not the rest, tune with the mood of a man who had seen the dead and dying on field and in hospital. They tune with the mood, too, that Lincoln would have preferred to the hatred that fired so many after his own death.

## RESIGNATION

There is no flock, however watched and tended,  
But one dead lamb is there!  
There is no fireside, howsoe'er defended,  
But has one vacant chair!

The air is full of farewells to the dying,  
And mournings for the dead;  
The heart of Rachel, for her children crying,  
Will not be comforted!

Let us be patient! These severe afflictions  
Not from the ground arise,  
But oftentimes celestial benedictions  
Assume this dark disguise.

We see but dimly through the mists and vapors;  
Amid these earthly damps  
What seem to us but sad, funereal tapers  
May be heaven's distant lamps.

There is no Death! What seems so is transition;  
This life of mortal breath  
Is but a suburb of the life elysian,  
Whose portal we call Death.















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